

1/17/96

Dear Artie,

I would really like to talk to you about the date industry, if you ever get the chance to spend some time down here. I'm newly elected president of the Desert Valleys Chapter, California Certified Organic Farmers. (California Redi Date is our newest member).

To me, a farmer is someone who "farms," plants seeds, prunes vines, picks and packs his produce. There are still many "farmers" in CCOF, and many people who would like to be farmers, but because of the pressures of this capitalist society, spend most of their time at a desk or on the phone or in a pick-up. CCOF could still be organized by us "farmers" But already, the voice of huge corporate farms in the grapes, rice, Gallo and Pavich and Pandoll, corporations interested in exports and million dollar advertising -- these guys are taking over, even in "organic."

In our chapter, we have one "big" vegetable farm and several small ones. In the dates, we have several farmers like me, and one farmer that became an "executive of his firm. The firm is now in bankruptcy, the workers loose, everyone losing. Now Redi Date has just joined CCOF with 40 acres organic and the rest conventional.

How could the union help someone like me and my brothers and sisters throughout the date industry?

The questions I would ask you in Asilomar (and your colleague in the coop movement) are along these lines:

#1 PALMEROS; Of the 200 or so skilled palmeros who work in the date palms in the Coachella Valley, many also work as independent contractors, renting a dozen palms here, 40 there, almost always less than an acre. The dates from these palms are sold back to the packing sheds. A 300 pound crop (ie. a single mature Medjool palm) with a potential street value of up to \$1500 is sold by the producer-farmer for about \$300. Half of that then typically goes back to the land owner. The palmer ends up with \$150 for his labor, about 10% of the street value of his production.

I would like your comments on how the Union and/or a coop might function to organize these farmers/workers, and whether the union label could serve as a valued logo in the consumer market, just as the CCOF logo is slowly becoming.

#2 ABSENTEE OWNERS: An elderly woman approached me in the farmers' market in Fullerton, and told me she loved my dates, and that in fact she had her own 18-acre date garden in the Coachella Valley. Her husband had planted the palms. And seeing my dates brought back such wonderful memories of living on that farm; and her grandson spent some years there, the happiest in his life...

But her husband died and she moved to Orange county and the grand-son is now a teenager immersed in video games, and may choose to be a banker or stock

broker or lawyer, without ever really having the option of living among and working the palms that his grandfather had planted...

Her farm is now managed by a packing house. Her minimal payments and return from them barely cover the taxes and insurance and headaches. It would be cheaper for her to sell it and buy tax-exempt bonds and have a steady 5% return...

And the workers are not benefiting from this system, feel underpaid and resentful...

And in fact the packing sheds are not really thriving, with portions of last years' crops still unsold, squeezed by brokers and chain stores and bankers....

Could the Union assist the workers of that farm (ie. as organized through the ranch committee) to lease and run that farm -- eliminate the labor contractors and minimize middle management functions; and through a union label with nationwide recognition and respect (and hopefully and not illogically the workers would vote to go organic) could the union help the Ranch Committee to get a better price for the crop, and thus a better return on their labor...?.

Of course I am interested in getting union label for my own dates. Half my customers are UFW friends. But neither my partner nor I wants to be an employer. We would need the union's help in setting us up legally so that the Ranch Committee could function as the employer. We also have minimal records and specifically do not keep records on hours We are so small we would be more trouble than any dues we paid. Ideas to think about. Both Paniagua and I are life-long union members, open to negotiations whenever there is a chance for increasing benefits to the workers.

And have you considered offering Redi-Date and CCOF a double label with the eagle and "organically grown" underneath? If you get a chance to sit down with Diane Bowen and the CCOF board, it is something to raise. That eagle is what you have to offer family farmers, and it could be worth a fortune, as Lionel Steinberg proved in 1970. And for many farmers, it could offer more than enough in pay back to make it worthwhile to include the workers in the decision-making process of farming...

All best wishes, Viva la Causa...

Doug Adair